

High Charity

by forever restless

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Summary: Chronicles events post H2. The Arbiter, Commander Keyes and company leave Delta Halo and jump to Earth, while Cortana attempts to find a way off and destroy High Charity. Finished.

1. The Empty Grave

I "The Empty Grave

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Covenant Holy City, High Charity

Holding Position over Delta Halo (Installation 05)

October 24, 2552 (Military Calendar)

Approximately 0600 hours

The inner halls of High Charity stood silent. The green spores of the infectious Flood infestation lingered in the air. A green fog hung as well. The once great and glorious High Charity now stood as a silent testament to the ravages of this thousand-years war that had begun again two human months ago.

The corridors were pitch black, and had been since the Forerunner ship providing power for High Charity had departed, leaving the Holy City with only auxiliary power from two fusion engines. Low running lights in the halls would have provided a little light, had they not been encrusted with Flood growth reminiscent of mushrooms on Earth.

Something moved in the Inner Sanctum. On a holo-pad, the violet-blue sheen of a sparkling hologram in the shape of a woman's body appeared. Many symbols scrolled down her length and recycled at the top of her slim figure. The light emanating from her form cast conspicuous shadows on the mauve and amber tinged walls. It failed to

penetrate and reflected upon the thick, soupy air.

She spoke.

"Hello?"

Her voice echoed in the vast, empty chamber, repeating her singular greeting, then fading.

_That was futile, _she thought. _Who the hell do I think I'm talking to?_ Constructs like her didn't do futile things. Everything was done with a purpose. But these weren't exactly normal circumstances, so she let it slide without punishing herself too harshly.

She had been in standby mode ever since the Chief had left onboard the Forerunner ship. She had seen no purpose in remaining active. Besides, there would have been nothing to do but watch the Flood kill and consume the remaining Covenant aboard the derelict city.

She had seen enough life destroyed by them. No repetition was necessary for her.

She listened carefully for any signs of movement in the chamber. The only sound she heard was the annoying electronic buzzing made by doors on Covenant ships when opening and closing. And the door making this sound was obviously doing both. Over and over.

"Well that's going to piss me off if I'm going to have to sit here and listen to that," the voice said. She considered dropping back into standby mode. There was nothing she could do.

As if on cue, something happened to make her reconsider. High Charity shook and groaned, metal pinged and popped under the excessive strain of being bent or moved in ways it wasn't intended to. Then, a deep, throaty voice spoke authoritatively. A voice that would have sent a chill down the AI's spine, had she had one. A very familiar voice.

"Silence fills the empty grave, now that I have goneâ€|"

"Oh hell," the construct sighed. She observed the now-familiar Gravemind's green, wrinkled tentacles creeping through the errant door that was now the least of her annoyances.

"But my mind is not at rest, for questions linger onâ€|"

_Great. Now he's rhyming, _she thought. _How nice._

"I will ask, and you will answer." The voice demanded as one of its tentacles approached the AI.

She considered a moment, and then held a hand up to the tentacle that was threatening to touch the hologram.

"Alright. Shoot."

"Where is the world the others seek to find, and why do they think they are runningâ€| outâ€| ofâ€| timeâ€|?" the voice struggled to say.

"Are you stupid?" she snapped. "Hell, I thought you were smarter than that. You've witnessed their ranks break once already," she said, then paused. She decided to elaborate. In a more controlled tone, she continued, "They want to finish the human race before they have any more trouble. Do you think that if allegiances are shattered any more than they already are that they will be able to accomplish their mission?" She stopped once again and let him absorb what she had said.

"The human race is weak now, yes, but they're not yet a doormat to be walked over. One or two Covenant races could not defeat us, depending on which said races they are, grantedâ€| but still, we stand a better chance than with the entire Covenant breathing down our neck."

She issued her final statement. "The Elites have sided with us. That's something to be said."

She had picked up this tidbit before she put herself into standby mode. She had used what was remaining of one of High Charity's communications arrays to scan for any human transmissions, and this information had been relayed through many wide-beam transmissions to the nearest human battle groups. Even though 'near' might not have been the appropriate word, High Charity was still able to pick up transmissions from a greater distance than any human com system. For once, she was grateful for the Covenant's far greater advanced technology.

That news had somehow put her at ease. It had caused her to think that, in spite of their differences, some of these aliens were, in fact, human, so to speak. She laughed at that when she had thought it the first time. An inappropriate analogy, yes, but accurate.

The Gravemind groaned and yelled. "You did not answer the entire question, construct. I desire to know the location of this valuable worldâ€|," he said, "And what, do tell makes it so valuableâ€|? Your races home world, perhaps?" he trailed off.

"I will tell you nothing. Of that topic anyways."

_How do I get out of this one? _She thought.

Silence fell over the chamber once more. The faulty door kept opening and closing, making that irritating sound.

"They recognize the weakness of their Holy Pact, yet fail to do anything about it..."

He was silent for minute or so.

"Their leaders are erroneous in their thinking. They do not recognize the significance of the Ringsâ€|"

He seemed to be thinking, pondering something heavy.

"What's on your mind?" Cortana said with a smirk.

He laughed the most grotesque laugh she had ever heard, then said, "I'm going to make you a deal, constructâ€|"

"I'm all ears."

Updated July 19 '07.

Final Revision Done. Yay!

Wow, looking back, this has the makings of a really good story. I've got a plotline all fleshed out in my head, it's just time to crack down and write it. Chapter 3 is up as of today, so check that out. Thanks for reading! I remember when I started this, I just had a few thoughts and put them down on paper. Besides, I was always fascinated with the magic of that last scene from H2. I'm so weird. Anyways, keep on the lookout for updates!

2. Solemn Journey

**II "Solemn Journey**

**-----**

Bridge of the UNSC Titan-Class Cruiser _Solemn Journey_

In Slipspace, en route to Earth

October 24, 2552 (Military Calendar)

Approximately 1200 hours

"Captain Keyes?" a voice said. "Captain?"

Captain Miranda Keyes combed her hair thoughtfully with the fingers of her right hand as she stood in front of the large, translucent LCD viewscreen on the bridge of the titan-class cruiser, _Solemn Journey_. The glow of an AI construct shone from a cylinder at the far right end of the viewscreen. Its appearance was an ancient formation of stars, a constellation that Keyes had been told as a little girl shone in the vast Earth sky at night.

The titan-class series of Destroyers had a similar design as the Halcyon-class ships like the _Autumn_, except for one major external difference. Instead of the bridge being set on the underside of the ship, it was smack in the center at the bow of the ship, giving a much clearer view ahead. There were disadvantages, however. If the Covenant so wished, they could directly target bridge. Nonetheless, Keyes enjoyed the view. She was staring straight through the viewscreen in front of her, and out into the nothingness outside the viewport. Slipspace held nothing visual.

"Yes, Gemini?"

"ETA at Earth is on the screen, Captain."

She was silent for a moment, then said, "Thank you, Gemini."

With that, the AI's glowing image disappeared.

Miranda was relieved to hear this news. It had only been four days since she had left the planet she loved, yet it seemed like an

eternity ago.

She glanced around the bridge, sizing up everyone. Sergeant A. J. Johnson was standing at the forward section of the bridge, staring out of the large viewport as she had been, into the vast beyond of Slipspace. He was breaking protocol, as usual, by smoking a very strong-smelling cigar. The blue smoke hung heavily in a cloud around him, and the sweet smell wafted around the bridge.

Various crew members and other UNSC personnel that had been rescued on Delta Halo crewed the ship and bridge under Keyes' command. A blonde-haired woman, Lieutenant Loveless, manned the NAV station along the port side of the bridge. It was complete with three large screens, three keyboards and numerous other input devices. Loveless was hunched over in her chair, her hand to her face, supporting herself on her elbow. Keyes liked Loveless â€“ she was a hardcore, straight-up Navy officer. Her looks said 'hard-ass' but her personality outside of duty was quite the opposite.

She was pale, and had hard, edgy facial features. She was thin, and always had her short, golden hair slicked back over her head. She looked 'rolled hard and put away wet' as they said, but her personality was that of a flower in full bloom. She would be glad to sit and have a conversation with you all day, or offer support and advice any time you needed it.

Yet, at the same time, she was totally given to her duty. She was a fine officer and soldier, and Miranda was damn glad to have her.

Very few of the original crew of Keyes' former ship, In Amber Clad, had survived the horrors of the Ring, and the Flood. Loveless was from the original crew of this ship. The others weren't essential to the command deck, so they were either talking, prepping gear to be returned to Earth, or repairing a vital subsystem somewhere.

The Arbiter, after convincing his Elite brothers to forge an alliance with the human race, a significant turning point in the war, had plotted the same course as the Solemn Journey, and was following with all the ships in his command â€“ nearly two dozen Covenant Battle Cruisers and seven Capital Ships. A battlegroup that size could glass a small world in approximately an hour.

Miranda knew the aid of the Elites would be a turning point in the war. She understood why they, after being turned upon by the Brutes and rest of the Covenant, sans the Hunters and certain Grunt factions, had joined them. She almostâ€¢ allowed herself to sympathize with the plight of the honorable Sangheili. This was difficult for her, after so many years of war against them and the rest of the Covenant, but she knew she had to come to terms with it eventually. As the rest of the human race would have to.

They had fought alongside each other already, the humans and the Elites, around and on the Elite controlled ships around High Charity. The Brutes the Covenant Hierarchs had proclaimed the Elite's existence a heresy, and had attempted to board the remaining functional ships under Elite control and prevent them from joining forces with the humans.

They had failed.

With the aid of the Elites, the humans had finally won a battle in this long and devastating war. "The Battle of High Charity," the soldiers had already dubbed it. The battle caused by the Elites abandoning the Covenant.

The Elites and humans were becoming brothers; they had torn down the barriers of mistrust and contempt forged by decades of hard fought war. Now, they stood together. She observed the two races acting like friends in some cases, standing together and chatting in the halls of Solemn Journey. The Arbiter had noticed the same on his ship, the Goodness and Purity, for some humans had stayed on that ship, and some Elites on the Journey.

Not that the situation was perfect. Far from, in fact. Some of the elder Elites had completely disagreed with the decision to side with the humans, arguing that they could not possibly support the race that they had fought to destroy for so long. The younger ones won out, however, deciding that the Covenant's beliefs and the Prophet's orders no longer coincided with their race's beliefs and traditions, and that they would fight along the humans.

There was still tension between human forces and Elites. In addition to the ones becoming friends, there was still the ones who sought nothing but conflict. She had also heard about a few fights breaking out on both ships, and she had put her foot down on the Journey, claiming that she would throw anyone fighting with the opposite race on account of said race into vacuum and let them float away.

There had been no further problems on her ship.

Miranda almost couldn't believe all this had happened in the space of four days. It seemed like a far cry from anything real that could exist in her world - a world of war, pain, and sacrifice.

There was a blip as the countdown on the viewscreen, glowing in cyan blue numbers arrived at 7:00 hours until arrival in the Sol System.

She sighed softly. I'm so tired! She hung her head and exhaled deeply. She had a killer headache as well, and the brightly lit bridge wasn't helping any.

The Sergeant came up behind her and laid a hand on her shoulder.

"You alright ma'am?" he said gruffly.

Everything he said was gruff.

"Yes, I'm fine Sergeant. I just need to rest."

It was true. She hadn't been this tired since basic. In fact, she hadn't seen more than twelve hours sleep total since the arrival at Delta Halo. Her eyelids began to drift shut, but she somehow managed to open them, and stand up straight again. The Sergeant's hand left her shoulder as she did this.

"Sergeant, I'm going to retreat to my quarters. Tell anyone else who needs to sleep to get it now. God knows, those ONI spooks aren't

going to be satisfied until they know every last bit about this long journey, from beginning to end, from each of us. Gemini?"

"Yes Captain?" the AI's glowing shape appeared again on the cylindrical holo pad.

"Keep my quarters locked, please. Wake me at thirty minutes to arrival. I leave Slipspace navigation to you."

"Understood."

Gemini disappeared.

"Sergeant, keep a tight watch over things. If the Arbiter or any of his soldiers require my assistance, tell them I'm not to be bothered unless it's an emergency. I trust you to let me sleep in peace. If someone or something wakes me up and it's not an emergency, you will feel my wrath." She gave him a wry smile. "If you need, catch a few winks yourself. Oh, andâ€| sleep tight."

He laughed. "Will do, ma'am. You're the one who should be worried about that."

She turned to Loveless. "Lieutenantâ€| please, go to sleep. I can't have someone on NAV who has their head constantly falling onto their station." She smiled wanly.

"Gladly, ma'am," the Lieutenant replied wearily, whirling around to face her. "Gladly. Permission to leave the bridge, then?" she asked.

"Granted." With that, Loveless stood up, and strode off the bridge, looking half-dead.

Miranda returned her attention to Johnson. "Wellâ€| goodnight," she said, chuckling, as she walked off the bridge as well. He smiled and shook his head. At least they could still joke.

She turned left in the olive and grey tone hallway, toward her borrowed quarters.

They actually belonged to Captain John D. Danielson, a decorated war hero, but he, and nearly all his crew had perished at the hands of the Brutes. They were part of a recon ticked sent to find and report on the status of In Amber Clad. They were intercepted in the atmosphere of the ring.

The ship was shot down at 65,000 feet, and crash landed not too far from the control room. Only ten crew members had survived the crash, and they were in miraculously good condition. Solemn Journey was heavily damaged, and the engines only ran, at maximum, at 62 percent power. The hull integrity was pitiful, less than 37 percent remaining, and many of the decks life support systems were offline.

They were lucky that the Shaw-Fujikawa Translight Engine still worked. That had been a miracle. It would get them from point A to point B.

After she keyed in her numerical password (which Gemini had to steal)

on the panel next to the door, a green light flashed next to the keys and the door opened.

The room was simple and small; there was a cot built into the wall on the right side, and a large oak desk sat in the center of the room. The walls were the same drab olive and grey color as all of the UNSC's ships. After nearly a seven years of military service, she was beginning to get sick of that color. She felt sorry for the older personnel, and for once, the brass.

Upon the desk were various scattered manila file folders brimming with paperwork and loose papers, as well as Miranda's personal laptop which was currently sitting open, and on standby reflecting light onto the wall behind the desk.

She didn't even bother with any of it. She would be home in a short seven hours, and not much troubled her.

Save one thing â€“ what had become of the Master Chief?

It was too late to think about it now - a deep sleep met her as soon as she collapsed onto the cot.

Author's notes time!

Update â€“ 7/19/07

This should be the final update. I think.

3. A Deal, A Distraction, A Plan

**III â€“ A Deal, A Distraction, A Plan**

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Part I â€“ Escape

Covenant Holy City, High Charity

Holding Position over Delta Halo (Installation 05)

October 24, 2552 (Military Calendar)

Approximately 0615 hours

The Gravemind was still talking, its tentacles curling and moving wildly in the air in the Inner Sanctum, but Cortana was having nothing to do with it. Her image appeared to be interested, her eyes intently following the abomination's tentacles, and talking to it, but she was busy in her own little world, trying to find a way off of High Charity. She had been somewhat curious to hear what the abomination had had to say in the beginning, but after his first few sentences, she completely blocked him out. She had directed about a third of a percent of her computing power to automatically respond to him verbally, and returned to her task.

If he had contemplated what he was saying in the least, it didn't show. He was requesting that, in exchange for her freedom (via his permission for a small team of humans to come retrieve her), that she _take _him to Earth. Her simple answer " hell no. That would be utterly inexcusable. Self-preservation was an instinct that Cortana did not give herself over to easily. Even though she knew that she was a valuable and rather expensive piece of technology, her destruction or loss was preferable to the annihilation and assimilation of the human race by the Flood.

He continued to drone on, and she continued to ignore him.

In the virtual world she inhabited, she believed that she may have found a way out of this predicament. As soon as the Gravemind had begun talking, she had begun searching all of High Charity's systems for any long range communications equipment that was still functional. She had soon discovered that the equipment she had used earlier to pick up the information that the Elites had formed an alliance with the humans no longer worked " that system had been deteriorating ever since the infestation had begun.

She searched and perused all of High Charity's communications arrays like a human searching a shelf of books, only _much, much_ faster. They appeared to her in the virtual world just as well as anything a human could see in reality " flying by her in tiny lines of code. Some items she saw as real objects " firewalls as padlocks that she smashed, security codes as doors she busted open, and encryption keys as master skeleton keys to every door in the house called High Charity.

After the Halo data had been dumped back at ONI headquarters, and her memory defragmented and restructured, her processing power was back to full functional capacity. The feeling of those millions of terabytes of data emptying out of her operational memory was nearly equivalent to the feeling of absorbing it back at the Installation " only better. She was much relieved; for all she cared they could have the data. She knew all she needed to know.

She found a working array. She reached out and touched it, a floating semitranslucent grouping of letters that said '_Com Array 13,' _pinging it, and an automatic response was given in the form of an automated message being sent to her.

This could be her ticket out. She booted it, grabbing the grouping of letters and seemingly absorbing it into herself, where really she was just manipulating the code and communicating with it. She then entered the proper routing keys to send a message to _In Amber Clad._ She knew that, obviously, the message could not be received, but she had been a few steps ahead of herself two days prior.

When she saw that _Amber_ had crashed into High Charity, she knew that it would no longer be of any use. Therefore, she set up a makeshift 'routing system' that would direct any messages, transmissions, etc; sent to the ship to every other operational ship that she knew had been at Delta Halo " a grand total of three.

They were the recon ticket that Captain Danielson's ship, the _Solemn Journey_ had led. She knew that it was the only operational one left, so she had no fear of the Flood intercepting sensitive information

when she set up the network. She had praised herself when she did this, because she knew_it would have some use. She had known that the only way off of that ring for Captain Keyes and the small band of survivors would be on that ship.

This would work.

She wrote a brief, short message about her whereabouts and the events that had taken place since they had gone their separate ways. Not too much, but not too little. She then encrypted it thrice over, engaged the long-range transmission array, and sent it to In Amber Clad, effectively bouncing a short, brief message text message light-years across the universe.

She knew they were most likely in Slipspace, therefore unable to receive her transmission, but they would receive it when they dropped out "as insurance" she 'told' the array to keep sending it every two hours. She let go of the comm array, dumping it from her memory banks, and freeing up yet more runtime.

The first part of her escape plan was complete. Time to move on to the second stage "she now needed to find a viable means of transportation out of High Charity. This was a complicated matter because there weren't many means of moving such a large program as her. Very limited means, in fact.

She stopped to listen to the outside world for a second, just to see how the conversation with the Gravemind was going. She had been vaguely aware of the direction it had been turning, but she hadn't been paying the utmost attention.

"Soâ€| constructâ€| do we have an accordâ€|?"

"I'm afraid not," her image responded simply.

The voice stopped speaking, and the tentacles stopped moving. "Then why would you dare continue to let me talk?" he demanded.

She paused, and smirked. "There is much talk. And I have listened. Now I shall talk, and you will listen," she said smartly.

He snarled and snapped, then, "Argh! I'llâ€| I'llâ€|"

"Do what?" she said loudly, placing her hands on her hips. "I'm everywhere, I am High Charity now! Do what you will," she said threateningly. Her holographic image disappeared in a flash.

She returned to her previous task, in the white, blank canvas of the virtual world. She scanned through spacecraft rosters, cargo listings, anything that might help at lightning speed. Icons of text files flew past her at light-speed. She read them all at faster than imaginable speed, and tossed them aside when she was done. She was looking for the only Covenant spacecraft other than a Destroyer or Cruiser that could handle a construct her size - a Seraph fighter, even though she was sure one had never been used for said purpose. She had skimmed over the schematics and details of the Covenant craft previously and found that she could, indeed, effectively cram herself into the ship's computer.

As she was perusing one of the rosters, she found there was one still

docked in launch bay 2. _But how to get in there? _

She reached out and touched an icon of the seraph, pinging the ship's computer, and she instantly got a response indicating that the computer was still intact. She instantly broke into it and accessed it, something similar to taking an axe or hammer to a padlock. Once she was in, she checked the status of the ship â€“ it was in tip-top shape.

She believed that she could somehow use an old friend to her advantage to get herself into that ship. The Covenant construct, the other presence that she had detected when she was with the Master Chief, before he had left her. In her many free hours here, she had tracked it down, and had finally managed to capture it in a web of virus code, freeze it, and eliminate it. She had effectively torn it apart line by line, assimilating important information as she saw fit.

Now she believed that one of its subroutines would come in handy. Covenant ships such as a Seraph fighter would only accept transmissions of her size from another Covenant ship â€“ an insurance policy that she had discovered by assimilating the Covenant Construct. If this failsafe were not in place, it would have been easy to simply package herself into file form, copy a transmission subroutine, and have it transmit her into the fighters computer, but it wasn't that simple.

However, she believed that she could 'rebuild' a working model of the other Construct, but only a shell. She thought she could perform the same procedure, only with the Covenant's subroutines handling the transmission. She would write the subroutines necessary to send a transmission into its code, tell the Construct to send her file in five seconds or so, package herself into file form, and _bam,_ she should be in the Seraph. _Should._

It sounded solid in theory, but she was worried it might not work out so easily in practice.

She accessed what was left of the other Construct, and began to rebuild it, line by line. She simply used some of the gargantuan amount of memory that High Charity's computers contained to do so, which also allowed her a 'breath of fresh air' so to speak. Any reprieve was welcome, and the removal of the other Construct's data felt refreshingly good. Its files weren't _horribly _oppressive, but now that she had grown used to the feeling of having all her runtime at her disposal again, it felt awkward to have other files weighing her down.

She rebuilt Construct and secured it, (she had stripped away all of it's offensive means when she had ripped it apart the first time), wrote the subroutine, set the transmission for ten seconds from now, and also simultaneously transmitted a small subroutine of her own to the Seraph in question. This subroutine would unpackage her when she arrived.

Total, her activities since she silenced the Gravemind had taken 2.24 seconds.

I really hope this worksâ€| she thought. If it didn't, she would have a hell of a time getting herself back into High Charity. At this

thought, she attached another subroutine to the Seraph's systems — a failsafe that would, in case something went wrong, would return her program right back into High Charity, bypassing all remaining security systems.

Her holographic image appeared again. "Sorry. It seems it's time for me to go," she said, her voice ringing through the chamber.

"WHAT?" the Gravemind answered, his voice reverberating and shaking the Sanctum.

"I'm leaving. Hate to eat and run, but there's places to go, things to do, people to meet. Goodbye, now," she said as her image disappeared for the last time.

_Here goes nothing, _she thought as she packaged herself. Her consciousness began to fade as her code essentially crumbled in on itself, from least important to most important, until she was no more.

The other's subroutine took over, and successfully transmitted her into the Seraph fighter's computer in approximately seven seconds. Nearly one and a half terabytes of data in seven seconds — it was a wonder of technology. Once her file had been received in the Seraph's computer, her subroutine took over. It began unpackaging her, this time in reverse order, from core systems to least necessary systems.

Once her core was in place, her consciousness began to come back to her. She appeared on a holopad inside the fighter, and took a look around.

"Hm," she said. "Not bad. Nothing like the _Autumn, _but—" she trailed off. "No time for reminiscing."

She started and flared the engines, one, two times. She disengaged the containment shields blocking the way out of the docking bay, and skillfully piloted the fighter out into open space; into the great, starry beyond.

Part II — Lay In Wait

Open Space, far side of Delta Halo

Covenant Seraph-class Fighter

October 24, 2552 (Military Calendar)

Approximately 1200 hours

The stars and outer space rolled by the open viewport at the front of the teardrop-shaped fighter. The ship was facing away from Delta Halo and High Charity, towards the edge of the system. She was heading slowly past the planet Atlanti, which Delta Halo was situated next to, and hoped to remain in its shadow on the far side as long as possible.

The interior wasn't cramped like a Longsword fighter at all, but it

wasn't exactly luxurious. The 'bridge', if you could call it that, of this fighter was probably double the size of a Longsword. There were two seats in front of a large array of holographic panels beneath the gargantuan viewport. Her holographic image stood about three feet tall in the center of the array of controls; she was much larger than on any human ship.

She had a rather large problem on her virtual, semitransparent hands. Literally. Two, actually. Two rather large dilemmas. A ring-shaped dilemma and a derelict floating city dilemma. An image of the ring floated and spun slowly above on hand, and High Charity floated above the other. She looked at them carefully, as if she were studying each of their structures intimately. She sighed once again, and shook her head, allowing her emotional subroutines to flutter. With a wave of her hands, the foreign structures disappeared. She turned and looked out the viewport at the vast nothingness around her.

She was good at solving dilemmas, so she didn't really have much to worry about. Time was the issue here — she could not stand waiting around with nothing to do. This dilemma would require such waiting. She had already given herself sufficient time to inspect the Seraph's computers and give herself a rest, and to also ponder said dilemmas and choose a course of action, and she wasn't too keen on using more time for nothing. After a great deal of thought, and a great deal of itemizing pros and cons to every possible option, she had come to only one best solution — High Charity and Delta Halo must be destroyed.

But she would have to wait to do so. She first had to get a response from Solemn Journey, or some other UNSC ship. She checked to see that the transmission was still being sent, and saw that it was. She then began to run a series of simulations, including an educated guess, on when Solemn Journey left, and how long it would take her to arrive at Earth. She had no illusions of the transmission failing to reach Earth; the Covenant's technology was flawless. The problem was time. The problem was always time. Her simulation completed and produced this result in about .03 seconds — it would take them approximately seven more hours to arrive.

She could wait that out, though. Seven more hours, then a response, and then she could destroy the infested High Charity and Delta Halo — with permission, of course, which she knew would be given. They probably hadn't given a second thought to what had happened back in this system when they left, and she didn't blame them.

While there was much that could be seized and learned from on the Delta Halo, the Flood posed too great a risk, and all that could be gleaned from High Charity was with Cortana, so there was nothing to lose. But, at the same time, she was destroying a centuries-old Forerunner construct, the mysteries of which had yet to be explained.

Her visual form sighed, and her inner emotional subroutines sparked for the second time that day. She knew what to do, but the knowledge-seeker and unrelenting hunger to learn inside of her (no doubt an aberration of Dr. Halsey's personality) told her not to.

She continued to pilot the Seraph past and then away from the planet, even further away from Delta Halo, and towards the very outer edge of

the system. She told the NAV computer to hold position. She then tapped into one of the onboard scanners, and observed High Charity for a few moments.

Her thoughts turned to John, Spartan-117. In reality, it had only been three days since she had been operational with him, in the field, but already it seemed like centuries. She had found that she had a special bond with him, something she couldn't explain. Nothing satisfied her more than being with him in the field, right in the line of fire, something which was truly curious for an AI. Constructs like her typically preferred to be protected, on a warship or with the brass back on Earth or, formerly, Reach.

But then again, she was one of a kind. She had the mind of Catherine Halsey. She knew it wouldn't be long until John and herself would once again be reunited, and no doubt thrust right back into the fray â€“ after all, he was a Spartan.

Her image disappeared again.

She set her internal clock to boot her up in six hours and fifty-five minutes, put all sensors on wide-scan, and promptly powered down into standby mode.

Update! 7/19/07

Awesome. This should be the final update for this chapter, as this was actually a really good chapter once I looked back at it. Anyways, thank you once again for your comments and reviews, it really helped. Thank you for everything, readers!

4. Loose Ends

**IV â€“ Loose Ends **

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Part I â€“ Earth

Sol System

UNSC Titan-Class Cruiser _Solemn Journey_

October 24, 2552 (Military Calendar)

Approximately 1900 hours

In the dark void of space, on the far side of Earth's moon, _Solemn Journey _winked into existence out of a rippling black and purple tinged hole from Slipspace. It quickly fired its engines and accelerated toward Earth.

On the bridge, Miranda Keyes stood at the viewport observing her ship pass around the moon. Soon enough, the giant luminescent marble, Earth, came into view, bit by bit. There were still Covenant Destroyers and Cruisers engaging the fleet all around Earth, and small flashes of white blue light and explosions dotted the space

around the planet. If they hadn't been connected with so many casualties and so much death, Miranda would have thought they were beautiful. Regardless, it was a grand and majestic sight.

"Hail HIGHCOM, Lt. Loveless," she said. Loveless, a man named Private Jansonns, and herself were the only souls currently on the bridge. Everyone else was sleeping, or trying to, as per her orders.

Loveless was still acting her NAV and COM officer, back from her nap, and looking much better than before. Jansonns was her weapons officer. Unlike Loveless, Jansonns had a horrible attitude. She had come very close to reprimanding him a number of times for insubordination, but had thought better of it. Like Loveless, he was very good at what he did. She had every confidence that, if targeting were left to him, he could put a few MAC rounds clean through a Destroyer.

Regardless of his attitude, Miranda once again thanked whomever for sending the both of them to her.

She overheard the woman speaking to HIGHCOM, requesting entrance into Earth's atmosphere without being blown to atoms.

"Commander?" Loveless said.

"Yes?"

"HIGHCOM has redirected me, said that Admiral Hood would like to speak with you."

The Commander's face wrinkled in concern. That meant new developments. And if they followed in her recent line of luck, they wouldn't be good.

"I'm putting it on the main screen now, Commander," Gemini's voice said.

"Understood." Miranda walked back to the screen just as Lord Hood's weathered face appeared in the top left corner.

"Long time, no see," he said derisively. "What in the hell happened?"

"You don't want to know," she replied simply. "Trust me. Now what's happening here?"

"Wellâ€¦ the situation's not good. Thousands of casualties, about half of the Grid is gone, and our fleet's numbers areâ€¦ well, depressing," he said, then paused. "There are a few Covenant remaining here, and we're mopping them up now. I heard that the Arbiter was sending support." He paused. "Speaking of whichâ€¦ what a move. This war has shifted to new horizons."

"Tell me about it," she replied. "The Arbiter and his fleet should be popping out of Slipspace any time now."

As she said this, a soldier in the background of Lord Hood's transmission bellowed, "New Covenant contacts, Sir! Towards the center of the system! Should we â€""

"No!" he stated. "Hail them, soldier."

There was a few moments of silence, then, "They're responding. It's the Arbiter!"

Lord Hood nodded softly. "This is just the sort of thing we need now. As soon as the rest of these asses are wiped up, meet me at Seongnam to discuss our situation. Lets say, 0200 hours?"

"Sounds good, Admiral. Sounds damn good."

"Oh, and welcome back. To you and all your crew."

"It's good to be back, Sir. I speak for everyone when I say that."

"Admiral Hood out," he said, and his image winked off the screen, replaced by a representation of Earth, and the current strategical situation, with overlays of all ships and the Orbital Defense Grid.

"Gemini, get me the Arbiter," she ordered.

"Understood."

It worried her that the Admiral hadn't so much as mentioned the Master Chief. She was hoping that he might know something about the Spartan. Perhaps he had already been presumed dead? She hadn't wanted to ask, as he had more important tasks to attend to, but she had also thought that he would have updated her if he knew anything. Now wasn't the time to worry, however. The image of the Sangheili known as the Arbiter appeared on her screen.

"Glad to see you joined us," she said. "I thought you would have beat us, considering your ships are much faster."

"We did," he answered bluntly. "We waited, on the far side of the planet, closer to the center of your system. In your time, you are four hours behind." He paused. "Your people never even knew we were here."

This scared her. They had been waiting for four hours, behind her homeworld, and her people had never even known it. It once again hit home how much more powerful the Covenant was compared to them. It was a relief to know that the Sangheili were on their side now.

"Alright, then. We have new orders. We are to destroy the rest of the Covenant ships engaging us, and then return to these coordinates. Gemini, send the coordinates for Seongnam. I only want you and the uppermost of your hierarchy there. Leave the rest of your ships in orbit."

"Received," he said, "And understood. We shall begin now, and cleanse this filth. Sending reinforcements your way."

"Good luck. Let us know when the task is complete," she said.

"Understood. _Goodness and Purity _out."

The Journey had been sitting at a safe distance from the action, but the Covenant had suddenly taken an interest in them and three Destroyers were moving in. Their sleek, chrome forms moved toward them like a couple of futuristic sharks gliding through space.

She was about to neglect the incoming reinforcements and make an in-system jump to the other side of the planet using Cortana's new algorithm that had been distributed throughout the fleet, but thought better of it when five of the Arbiter's ships did just that.

They winked into existence in front of the approaching ships, cutting them off, and with their lateral lines already heated with angry plasma. They turned, and fired. The superheated plasma streaked through space, and impacted the three Destroyers. Their silver shields rippled, shorted out, and soon the ships were boiling masses of fire.

This would be one more battle to win.

But the real battle hasn't even begun yet, _Miranda thought to herself. _It hasn't even begun._

Admiral Hood's face once again appeared and spoke to her.

"My sensors report that all Covenant ships have been eliminated, Commander. Good work. I request that â€œ "

"New transmission, Commander," Gemini's voice interrupted.

Miranda cocked her head slightly and said, "Hold on, Admiral." She turned her attention to Gemini. "Is it a priority?"

"Top priority, with an emergency tag."

"Play it back for me."

"Ma'am, it's not an audio transmission. It's text."

This was extremely strange. Text messages were usually last resorts, and not used too frequently on account of their notorious nature of being decrypted quite easily.

As if reading her mind, Gemini said, "This message is encrypted three times. Working." There was a brief moment, then, "Got it. It's on the screen, now."

Miranda's eyes slid over the two-paragraph message from Cortana, taking it in slowly. Seeking to destroy High Charity? The Master Chief, onboard a Forerunner ship heading for Earth? So much information, so fastâ€!

She was requesting pickup as well. Miranda sighed to herself. Cortana would shit if she had any idea how bad the situation was here. She would do her best to get her back, though.

"Admiral," she stated.

"Yes?" he said curiously.

"I've found Cortana. That transmission was from her. She's seeking to destroy High Charity and Delta Halo."

"High Charity? Delta Halo?" he said, genuinely concerned.

"Shitâ€|" she muttered under her breath. She had completely neglected to remember that the Admiral had no idea about everything that had happened.

Gemini interrupted. "Commander? Why not simply have the Admiral review the report that Cortana compiled and sent with this message?"

"There's an attachment?" she said questioningly. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Gemini hesitated. 'Dumb' AI's weren't supposed to hesitate. "Well, firstly it's eyes only, and not only that, but it's for the _Admiral's_ eyes only. I was going to notify him on a private channel but now doesn't exactly seem like the time for protocol."

This behavior was extremely erratic. Keyes was beginning to wonder if Gemini was nearing the end of her operational life cycle. AI's never went against protocol, except for Smart AI's like Cortana, which Gemini definitely was not."

"Show me," the Admiral said directly, "Now."

Approximately thirty minutes later, the skeletal pyramid of a Forerunner ship came into existence, on a vector headed directly for Africa. The ship in question traveled much faster than any Covenant or Human ship outside of Slipspace, and bypassed the Orbital Defense Grid in a matter of minutes. Unbeknownst to its crew, they hadn't passed completely unnoticed.

Aboard the bridge of the Cairo, a communications officer intercepted a long-range transmission on the UNSC E-Band.

"This is SPARTAN-117, does anybody copy?" _

"Isolate that signal!" the Admiral yelled to his COM officer on the bridge of the Cairo. The Admiral was standing in front of one of the large viewports which provided a beautiful, clear view of Earth. He was searching the void endlessly, his eyes darting back and forth as if trying to isolate the source of the signal himself.

"This is Lord Hood. John, you mind telling me just what the hell you're doing on that ship?"

It was a rarity when a superior used a SPARTAN's real name. If they even knew their real name.

"Sir, finishing this fight."

Part II â€“ The Beginning Of The End

Open Space, far side of Delta Halo

Covenant Seraph-class Fighter

October 24, 2552 (Military Calendar)

Approximately 1932 hours

Cortana was observing High Charity through one of the onboard sensors when she got her response.

She instantly opened and decrypted the text message in nanoseconds, and noticed that the encryption had the tag of Gemini on it. That explained the lackluster encryption job. Gemini had nothing on her.

She skimmed the message, and, satisfied, primed _In Amber Clad's_ engines to detonate. She fired the Seraph's engines, and quickly flew the ship to the edge of the system. Personnel were on the way to pick her up, and they wanted to witness the fireworks.

Her orders had been to wait until her ride showed up, unless ordered otherwise. Hopefully it wouldn't come to that, because that would mean that it was too late. For everyone.

Slipspace

Bridge of the Covenant Cruiser _Silence and Wisdom_

October 25, 2552 (Military Calendar)

Approximately 2300 hours

Miranda had done nothing but stand around on the enclosed bridge of the Covenant ship as the Arbiter explained how the hundreds of holographic controls worked for the past three hours. Those weren't the limits of the conversation, merely the meat of it. She was fascinated with the workings of the Cruiser. She was interrupted, however, when the Covenant construct spoke in its chilling, monotone voice.

"Exiting Slipspace, now. We have arrived at the location of the Holy City and the Holy Ring."

"Understood," the Arbiter responded.

The trip had been much shorter this time around; that was why Admiral Hood had instructed Miranda and the Arbiter to take one of his Cruisers. Keyes was thankful for this, for she did not know how many long Slipspace trips she had left in her.

An outside view appeared on one of the holographic screens, displaying the same view that would be had through a viewport on a human ship.

"Scan for the Seraph with the designation provided previously," the Arbiter ordered.

Miranda knew that Cortana already knew they were there. Cortana was always ten steps ahead.

"Located," the hissing voice said. On another of the holographic screens, a map of the system and Atlanti showed up, with all significant objects shown with icons. The icon indicating the Seraph fighter was tagged green, and enlarged in the top-right of that screen.

"It is currently on a vector headed straight for us," the voice said again.

"Understood. Open a transmission with it."

Cortana's voice would fill Miranda with such unbelievable relief. Whenever Cortana was around, Keyes felt safe, as irrational as that was.

"Well, well, well," her voice rang out. "I never thought you would come," she said matter-of-factly.

Miranda laughed. "Don't get too excited, it's not that great on the other end of the universe."

"Really? You'll have to update me then, won't you?" she said, then paused. "I'm going to pilot this thing into one of the shuttle bays. I know that there is a Covenant AI on your ship. Once I'm docked, have it transmit me into the system. I'm not going to do what I had to do to get into this ship again," she said. "Long story. Cortana out."

Minutes later, Cortana stood on the center of the holographic panel on the bridge. She had double and triple-checked that In Amber Clad's engines were primed, then piloted the Silence and Wisdom as far away as she could possibly get while still able to provide a good view. This would be much different than the last time she detonated a reactor, when she and the Master Chief almost got fried.

"Ready for some fireworks?" she said.

"You have no idea," Miranda replied.

She engaged the long-range scanners and brought the image of High Charity and Delta Halo up close on the holo panel to her left, and then enlarged the size of said screen. The small group of Elites and Marines sent with Miranda and the Arbiter joined them.

"Detonating In Amber Clad's reactor in five," Cortana announced.

Those were the longest five seconds Miranda had ever experienced.

Suddenly, small plumes of fire began to explode outward from the half-circle-like bulb that High Charity consisted of.

A blinding white and blue explosion consumed the city, and the ring. Everyone was forced to look away from the screen as it turned entirely white. They felt the ship move slightly underneath them, and heard the detonation with their own ears, inside the ship.

When they returned to the screen, there was no High Charity to be found, and the Ring was falling apart, piece by piece. The explosion had consumed the nearest section of ring, which spun into another section of ring, and so on.

Cortana had seen this before. It brought back the memory of the first Halo again â€“ and how much simpler that situation had been back then. She had been informed of the current situation on Earth, and seeing this caused her to long for the simpler days. She remembered when losing Reach had been a devastating defeatâ€¦ Miranda's words interrupted her thoughts.

"Isn't itâ€¦ hardâ€¦ for you?" she said, looking first at the Arbiter, and then the rest of his Elites. "After searching for and worshipping them for so longâ€¦" Her words drifted away. A few seconds of silence passed as they watched the ring fall into pieces, and drift into the void of space.

"No," he replied simply. "The rings were a lie. The prophets were a lie. The rings mean nothing to me." He stopped, and then added, "To us," he said, motioning to his Elites. They nodded silently.

"We stand together, and we must crush the Covenant. What we once stood for, we now see to be nothing more than a lieâ€¦" his speech drifted off. "And when I hold Truth's head in my hand, and wear his blood on my armor, the Covenant will be no more than a distant memory, and they shall leave a flawed legacy behind."

Cortana designed a destination solution for Earth, engaged the Slipspace drive, and the Cruiser disappeared from the soon to be field of glittering debris.

Update! 7.30.07

Hrm. I've been having trouble coming up with my epilogue, my fifth chapter. It's a hard one. Not to mention the fact that band camp now consumes my lifeâ€¦ But it's coming. I promise.

Thanks for reading once again! Then next story I will be focusing on is my Silent Hill 4 parody, The Ridiculously Cramped, Cheap Living Space. If you dig that, then check it out. Bye!

5. Epilogue : Only The Beginning

**v â€“ Epilogue - Only The Beginning**

_-----*

The space around Earth was ablaze when _Goodness and Purity _returned.

Nearly a thousand Covenant ships had amassed in the space around Earth and its moon, and were engaging what remained of humanity's fleet. Miranda had received the transmission for all UNSC personnel to return to Earth as soon as they dropped out of Slipspace behind the moon once again, but she never imagined it would be this bad.

The general strategy among the humans seemed to be retreat, and most of the fleet were doing so, but some remained behind to distract the vicious Destroyers and Cruisers.

The entire crew inhaled sharply when the sight appeared on the forward viewscreen. Even Cortana remained silent. Explosions dotted the area, and debris hurled through space in all directions. The Covenant ships were everywhereâ€| and soon they would know they were there.

Mercy's last words rang through Cortana's mind.

This timeâ€| none of you shall be left behind!

It seemed like he may not have been lying.

"Iâ€|" she stuttered. "I don't know what to do. But I need to make a decision quick, because we are going to attract attention sooner or later."

"Contact Seongnam," Miranda said. Seongnam was one of the strongest military outposts on Earth â€" they could tell her what to do.

A few seconds passed, then Cortana's voice said solemnly, "No response. I've even tried to ping a few of the computers that I am familiar with there andâ€|" she then paused again, and sighed. "I don't think that there _is _a Seongnam left."

Silence stilled the air on the bridge.

"Wait," Cortana said urgently. "The Chief."

The silence was instantly broken. "What?" Miranda said. The other Marines on the bridge gave Sergeant Johnson an excited look, while he stared at Cortana. She opened the UNSC E-band transmission that she was now receiving.

"Cortana, I know Lord Hood has spoken with you. I am on the surface in central Sudan, heading for the Ark. I have to beat Truth there. As you can see, they beat you back. I knew they would as soon as I heard someone was going for you. I request that you find me, because I'm going to need you. It turns out you are more significant than ever. I need you to hack into the Ark."

"_The Demonâ€|" _ the Arbiter said softly.

The message cut to static, then repeated. "Cortana, I knowâ€|"

She cut the channel. "It seems we have no choice now. I have to find the Chief and touch this ship down in atmosphere â€" we have to get to him."

Just then, a battlegroup of thirty Cruisers turned their noses toward

the Goodness and Purity and heated their lateral lines.

An idea flew through Cortana's consciousness, but she then discarded it. No, it couldn't possibly work. Butâ€œ if you could jump from within an atmosphere, couldn't you jump into one? She toyed with the idea for another second and a half and then decided to risk it.

"Hold on." She fired the Slipspace drive, and the ship disappeared.

On an open field with rolling grasses and nothing but horizon for seemingly forever, the Chief stood alone for the first time in a long time. No Covenant yet. He had taken a Pelican, and landed it in one of the deeper lows of the rolling hills. If he attempted to fly it to the Ark site, then he would be leading Truth right to it.

He had discovered that the Ark had been kept secret for years. It had been found a long, long time ago, but had been given the top security priority ever, and its existence had been known to only a handful of people â€“ one of which happened to be his creator.

Halsey had contacted him as soon as he landed on Earth, and demanded that he get to Seongnam via a Pelican they were sending. He hadn't wanted to, naturally, because he wanted to get to the Ark as soon as possible. They took a risk, and assumed that Truth did not yet know where the Ark was on Earth. Human forces were deployed to stall for time.

The Chief knew what Catherine had to tell him must be life or death for all this. At Seongnam, before it had been invaded and destroyed, she had given him all the codes he needed to get into what she called "The Facility," but she had also warned him.

"There is nothing you can do without Cortana, John. There are things that she knows that even I do not yet. A long time ago, I programmed her to spend her entire lifespan decrypting some ancient Forerunner texts that we discovered here on Earthâ€œ what I believe to be the keys to stopping and hopefully destroying the Ark. According to my calculations, she should now be done decrypting them. _

And most of all, she is me. You need her.

Overhead, he heard a sonicboom, another deafening explosion, and a snapping sound, then witnessed a Covenant Cruiser appear in the atmosphere from Slipspace. Its nose obscured the sun from his view, and the land under it fell into darkness. It remained at an altitude of about 7,000 feet, just enough to open a grav lift, he guessed.

He figured he wouldn't be alone for long. Any second, he anticipated hundreds upon hundreds of soldiers pouring down a lavender grav lift attached to that ship.

Suddenly, an old friend's voice rang through his head.

"Thought we'd stop in and say hi," Cortana said. "I isolated your signal and jumped."

"â€|Cortanaâ€| "

"I know. Missed me, didn't you?"

"More than you know. I thought your ship would be just the beginnings of Truth's army coming to beat me to the Ark."

"No, but they are inbound," she said playfully. "I have a feeling that they're going to attempt to imitate what I just did, so we need to get a move on."

"Sounds like a plan to me."

"Soâ€|" she said, halting midsentence. "Are you ready to save the world again?"

Author's Notes! (7.30.07)

Wow, that was a hard chapter to write. I knew that I wanted to write a final chapter, but I wasn't quite sure how to end the short little story that I have spun. Wow. I know that it probably wasn't that good, or elaborate, but oh well. I'm not that good at writing. But if the people liked it, then that's awesome, because I had fun writing it. Hope you enjoyed, and keep on the lookout for new storiesâ€|

I think I'm going to take a short break, then write a little more of my SH4 Parody, of which three chapters are already done. (Hint, Hint. wink wink)

Thanks for reading!

End
file.